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ABSTRACT

Noting that when adolescents select friends, they are creating a relationship context that will be an important source of influence, this study examined the criteria adolescents use when choosing friends. Adolescents in grades 7 and 10 were interviewed about the criteria they used when selecting friends, particularly the importance they placed upon the potential friend's academic performance and problem behavior. Responses indicated that the characteristics most preferred in potential friends were personality attributes reflecting prosocial behavior and sociability. The characteristics most avoided in potential friends were problem behaviors such as aggression, substance use, and criminal behavior. Boys were more likely than girls to report that they select friends who are similar to themselves and avoid friends who use drugs or alcohol. Girls were more likely than boys to report that they select friends based on characteristics associated with intimacy and avoid friends who are untrustworthy. Tenth graders were more likely than seventh graders to report intimacy as a friendship selection criterion; seventh graders were more likely than tenth graders to report that acceptance was important when choosing friends. Academic performance was not an important selection criterion for most adolescents, although it was more important for seventh graders than for tenth graders and those with higher levels of academic performance. (Author/KB)

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Grade and Gender Differences in Adolescents' Friendship Selection Criteria

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Poster presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence
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Abstract

Adolescents in grades seven (N = 64) and ten (N = 43) were interviewed about the criteria they use when selecting friends, particularly the importance they place upon a potential friend's academic performance and problem behavior. The characteristics most preferred in potential friends were personality attributes reflecting prosocial behavior and sociability. The characteristics most avoided in potential friends were problem behaviors such as aggression, substance use, and criminal behavior. Boys were more likely than girls to report that they select friends who are similar to themselves and avoid friends who use drugs or alcohol. Girls were more likely than boys to report that they select friends based on characteristics associated with intimacy and avoid friends who are untrustworthy. Tenth-graders were more likely to report intimacy as a friendship selection criterion; seventh-graders were more likely to report that acceptance was important when choosing friends. Academic performance was not an important selection criterion for most adolescents, although it was more important for 7th graders and those with higher levels of academic performance.

Introduction

Friends play important roles in adolescents' lives (Berndt & Savin Williams, 1993). When adolescents choose their friends, they are creating a relationship context that will be an important source of influence. In order to fully understand the processes of friends' influence, therefore, it is necessary to understand why adolescents select particular individuals as their friends.

Similarity is an important factor influencing friendship formation (for a review, see Aboud and Mendelson, 1998). Adolescents tend to select as friends those who are similar in grade, gender, and ethnicity (Epstein, 1983), socioeconomic status and academic achievement (Kupersmidt et al, 1995), and substance use (Kandel, 1978). However, many of these characteristics are correlated within individuals (Wentzel, 1991; Hinshaw, 1992; Marcus, 1996). Consequently, the selection of a friend on the basis of one characteristic can lead to similarity in other attributes not deliberately selected.

The purpose of this study was to identify the criteria adolescents use to select their friends. We interviewed adolescents about the characteristics they consider important when choosing friends. Because adolescents' friends have been shown to influence academic performance and problem behavior, we were particularly interested in whether adolescents use these characteristics as friendship selection criteria. We were also interested in examining group and individual differences in adolescents' friendship selection criteria. Based on the well-established findings of developmental changes and gender differences in the functions and quality of adolescents' friendships, particularly the emphasis placed upon intimacy (e.g., Shulman et al, 1997), we expected to find gender and grade differences in reported selection criteria. Furthermore, we expected that adolescents' use of selection criteria relating to academic performance or problem behavior would vary in relation to their own level of academic performance and problem behavior.

Research Questions

1) What are the criteria adolescents use when selecting friends?
2) Are there gender or grade differences in the criteria adolescents use when selecting friends?
3) Are academic performance and problem behavior important criteria for friendship selection?
4) Are there group and individual differences in the use of academic performance and problem behavior as criteria for friendship selection?

Method

Participants

107 adolescents from a rural community

- 64 seventh-graders (35 male, 29 female), average age: 12.5
- 43 tenth-graders (15 male, 28 female), average age: 15.5

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Procedure

All participants completed a self-report questionnaire and participated in a videotaped interview conducted by the first author. Each interview was coded independently by two trained coders. Discrepancies between the two coders were discussed until agreement was reached.

Measures

Academic Performance

- Academic Functioning – adolescents' self-reported degree of agreement (on a 5-point scale) with 15 statements about how well they function in the classroom or as a student (e.g., school bores me).
- Academic Motivation – self-reported responses to five vignettes of hypothetical school dilemmas in which adolescents had to choose (on a 10-point scale) between actions that reflect high achievement motivation and actions that reflected low motivation (e.g., going to a concert versus studying for a test).
- Grade Point Average - the average of adolescents' most recent grades in social studies, math, English, and natural science courses, taken from school records.

Problem Behavior

- Delinquent Behavior – self-reported frequencies of participating in 20 delinquent activities (e.g., threatened to hurt someone, driven a car when drunk) using a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often)
- Substance Use – self-reported frequency of the use of 12 legal and illegal substances (e.g., cigarettes, marijuana) using a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often).

Interview Questions and Codes for Responses

"What kinds of things do you look for when selecting a friend?"

Postive Personality	*"Funny, nice"*
Intimacy	*"A person I can trust"*
Similarity	*"Someone who likes to do the same things as me"*
Acceptance	*"Someone who likes me"*
Status	*"Cool, popular"*
Academic Engagement	*"Cares about school"*

"What kinds of things do you try to avoid when selecting a friend?"

Aggression	*"Bullies other kids"*
Substance Use	*"Uses drugs"*
Criminal Behavior	*"Shoplifting, breaks the law"*
Snobbishness	*"Thinks they are better than me"*
Lack of Trust	*"Talks about me behind my back"*
Negative Personality	*"Loud, rude"*
Academic Disengagement	*"Failing in school"*
Use of Coercion	*"Pressures me to do things I don't want to do"*
Different Crowd	*"In the unpopular crowd"*

"Is academic performance important to you when deciding to become friends with someone?"

Yes, academic achievement is preferred.
Yes, academic achievement is to be avoided.
A little. I don't care as long as they do just enough to pass
No, it doesn't matter.

"Is problem behavior important to you when deciding to become friends with someone?"

Yes, problem behavior is preferred.
Yes, problem behavior is to be avoided.
A little. Problem behavior is okay if I'm not involved.
A little. Problem behavior is okay if the problems are minor.
No, it doesn't matter.

Results

What are the criteria adolescents use when selecting friends?

- In response to open-ended questions, 87% of the adolescents reported preferring positive personality characteristics reflecting prosocial behavior and sociability in potential friends. Characteristics associated with intimacy and similarity also were preferred in a potential friend, mentioned by 43% and 34% of the adolescents, respectively. (See Figure 1)
- Fifty percent of the adolescents reported that they avoided aggression in potential friends. Adolescents also said they avoided as potential friends those who were snobby (44%), who used drugs and alcohol (40%), and who engaged in criminal behavior (38%). (See Figure 2)

Are there gender differences in the criteria adolescents use when selecting friends?

- Girls were more likely than boys to prefer friends with characteristics related to intimacy, χ^2 (1, N = 97) = 6.205, p < .05. Also, girls were more likely to report avoiding becoming friends with those who were untrustworthy, χ^2 (1, N = 96) = 4.604, p < .05). (See Figures 3 and 4)
- Boys were more likely than girls to prefer friends with similar interests, χ^2 (1, N = 97) = 3.784, p < .05, and avoid those who used drugs and alcohol, χ^2 (1, N = 96) = 3.586, p < .05). (See Figures 3 and 4)

Are there grade differences in the criteria adolescents use when selecting friends?

- Seventh-graders were more likely than tenth-graders to prefer acceptance from potential friends, χ^2 (1, N = 98) = 7.097, p < .01. (See Figure 5)
- Tenth-graders were more likely than seventh-graders to prefer friends with characteristics related to intimacy, χ^2 (1, N = 98) = 4.859, p < .05. (See Figure 5)

Is academic performance an important criterion for friendship selection?

- No. Only nine percent of adolescents spontaneously mentioned academic engagement in response to open-ended questions about preferred characteristics in potential friends. (See Figure 1)
- When probed, 32% of the respondents said that academic achievement in potential friends was preferred; 60% said that academic performance doesn't matter to them when choosing friends. (See Figure 6)

Are there group and individual differences in the use of academic performance as a criterion for friendship selection?

- There were no significant gender differences in the importance of academic performance as a friendship selection criterion.
- Seventh-graders were more likely than tenth-graders to say academic achievement was preferred (40% versus 21%) and less likely to say that academic achievement doesn't matter in their friendship choices (49% versus 77%), χ^2 (3, N = 96) = 9.278, p < .05. (See Figure 7)
- Adolescents who preferred academic achievement in potential friends, compared to those who reported that it doesn't matter, earned higher grades, F (1, 85) = 11.35, p < .001, reported higher academic motivation, F (1, 85) = 12.43, p < .001, reported higher academic functioning, F (1, 87) = 8.29, p < .01, and reported engaging less frequently in problem behavior, F (1, 87) = 7.22, p < .01.

Is problem behavior an important criterion for friendship selection?

- Yes. In response to open-ended questions about the characteristics they avoid in potential friends, 50% of the adolescents spontaneously mentioned aggressive behavior, 40% mentioned substance use, and 38% mentioned criminal behavior. (See Figure 2)
- When probed, 66% of the adolescents said they would avoid becoming friends with someone who engaged in problem behavior and 13% said that problem behavior doesn't matter to them when choosing friends. Some minor problem behavior was acceptable to 10% of adolescents, and 9% said that problem behavior was acceptable as long they were not involved. Only 1% said they preferred friends who engage in problem behavior. (See Figure 8)

Are there group and individual differences in the use of problem behavior as a criterion for friendship selection?

- There were no significant gender or grade differences in the importance of problem behavior as a friendship selection criterion.

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Figure 1: Preferred Characteristics in Potential Friends

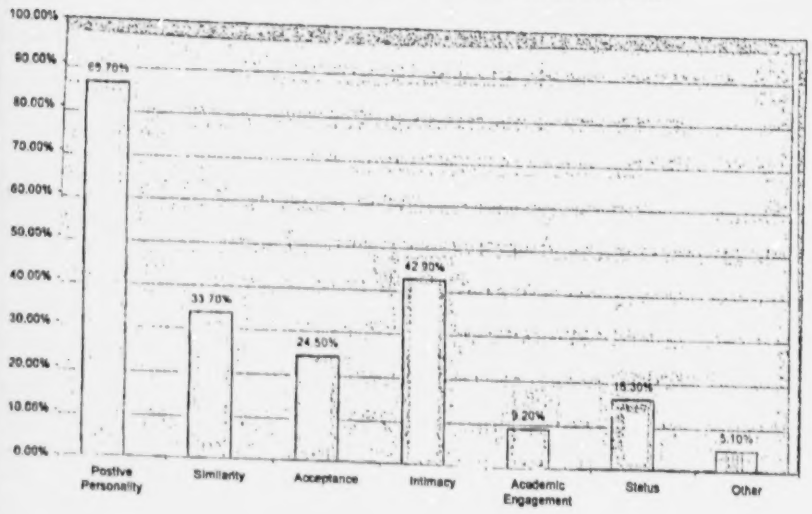


Figure 2: Avoided Characteristics in Potential Friends

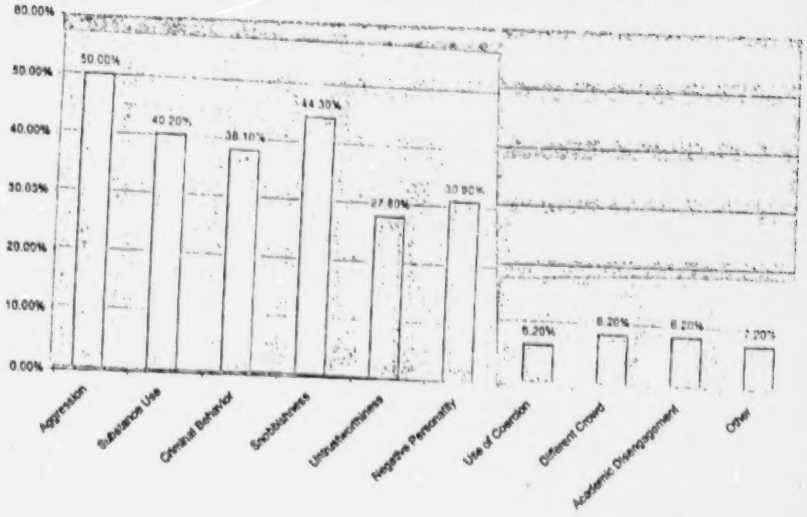
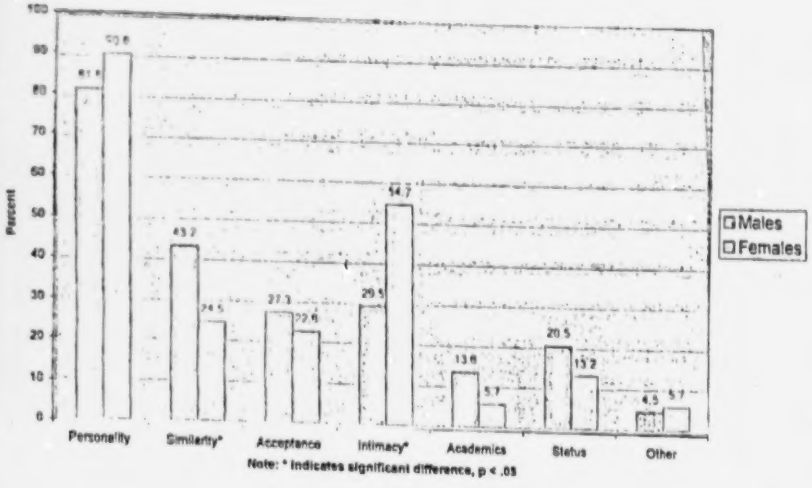
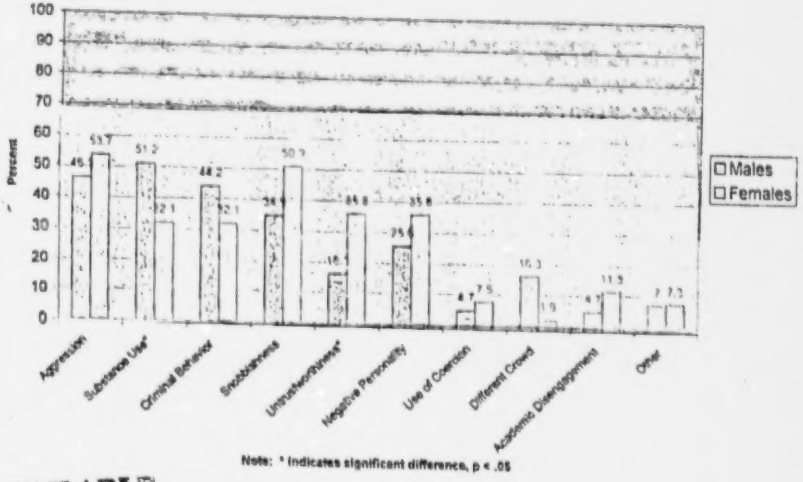


Figure 3: Gender Differences in Preferred Characteristics of Potential Friends



Note: * indicates significant difference, p < .05

Figure 4: Gender Differences in Avoided Characterstics of Potential Friends



Note: * indicates significant difference, p < .05

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Figure 5: Grade Differences in Preferred Characteristics of Potential Friends

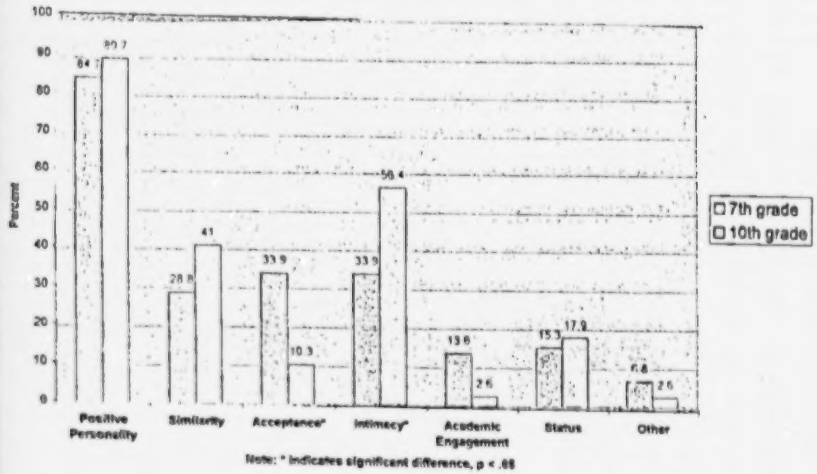


Figure 6: Adolescents' Use of Academic Performance as a Friendship Selection Criterion

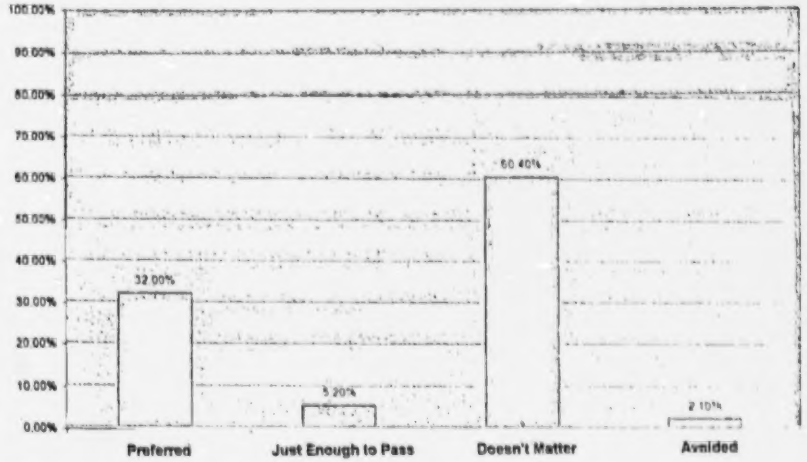


Figure 7: Grade Differences in Adolescents' Use of Academic Performance as a Friendship Selection Criterion

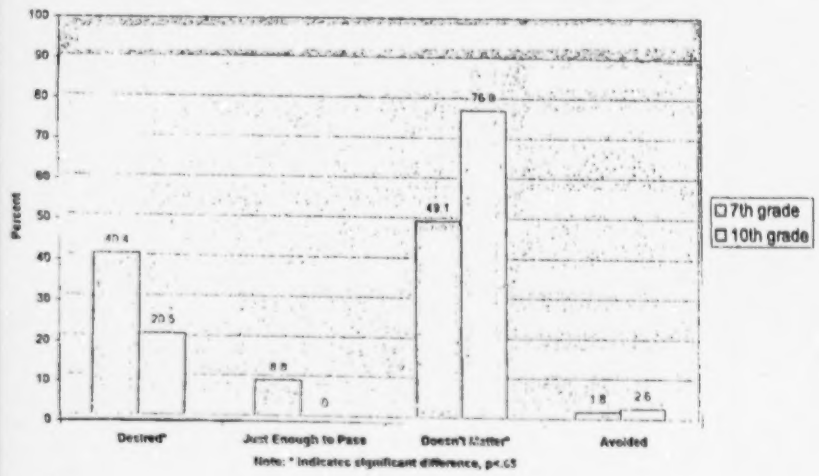
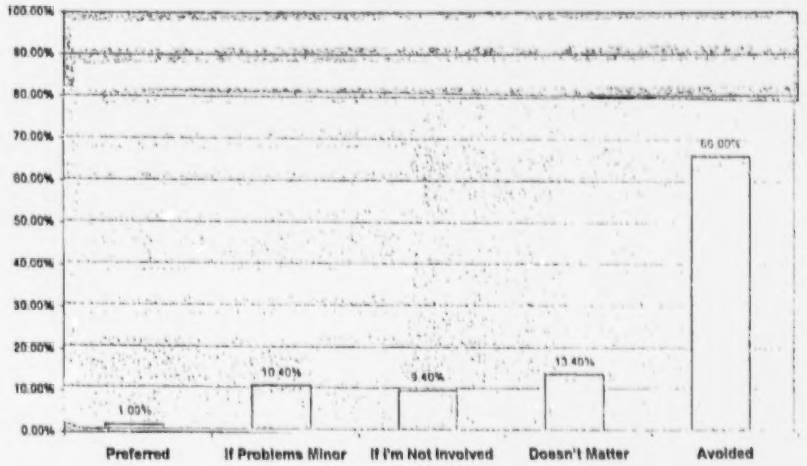


Figure 8: Adolescents Use of Problem Behavior as a Friendship Selection Criterion



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